the cultures to which they were exposed, western Europeans viewed Greek culture as the most significant. The Greek peninsula had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and, as in other European nations, a nationalist movement was stirring. Initially the major powers of Europe were reluctant to get involved with what was seen as an insurrection. The Congress of Vienna clearly held the Ottomans as the rightful rulers of the Greeks — to support the rebels would be to question the basis of the Congress System. But as the movement progressed, and as word of its atrocities circulated, sympathy grew. The works of Romantic artists played an influential role in the Greeks’ quest for independence. Through the application of Romantic philosophy to international politics, and through their art as a means to shape and spread the message and garner support, the Romantics made possible an independent Greece. Even before the war, a sympathetic interest in Greece had been growing in Western Europe. In addition to the general influence of Ancient Greek thought on Western culture, travel writing of the late 18th and early 19th century had helped to foster philhellenism in France, Britain and elsewhere. Though the Romantic Movement had yet to be named, the autobiographical works of travellers to the Ottoman Balkans used Romantic language to describe what they saw. What they saw was an oppressed and dejected people — a far cry from the splendour of Classical Greece.

French historian and travel writer Claude Denis Raffanel wrote: “Près des marbres majestueux… ma vue s’arrêtait avec douleur sur les triste chaumières où végétait, dans une lâche abandon, la servile postérité des héros.” This emotive and sympathetic picture of a Greece having been cast aside by history along with the popular contemporary Greece-themed poems — notably Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and Shelley’s Hellas — served to revive popular interest in Greece in the years leading up to the revolt. Some Romantics were directly involved in the great powers’ decisions to back the Greek cause. François-René Chateaubriand, who would later be considered the father of French Romantic literature, was a member of the Académie Française in 1825 when he wrote a pamphlet encouraging France to become involved in the Greek War of Independence. Note sur la Grèce was a clear example of Romantic philosophy applied to politics; it was simultaneously an emotional plea and a measured argument. It demonstrated Chateaubriand’s ability to act in different roles. In this document, he played both the level-headed politician and the bleeding-heart Romantic. He began by gripping his audience with the question: “Notre siècle verra-t-il des hordes de sauvages étouffer la civilisation renaissance dans le tombeau d’un peuple qui a civilisé la terre?” Having sufficiently compelled his audience with this distressing prophecy he transitioned into an utterly non-Romantic point-by-point rebuttal of anti-Greek arguments. He excused France from its commitment to the Congress of Vienna’s position on Turkey, saying that not only was Turkey absent from the Congress, but if the sultan heard that the Christian nations had guaranteed to protect his sovereignty over Greece, he would have considered it to be insolence. In response to the idea that the Greeks were the rightful subjects of the Turks, he proclaimed that they were not considered subjects, but rather slaves. To the Turks they were little more than “des chiens faits pour mourir sous les bâtons de vrais croyans [sic].” Chateaubriand argued that the Greeks have obeyed their “rightful masters” for almost three and a half centuries, and he justified their rebellion by describing their unbearable oppression: Mais lorsqu’enfin on a pendu ses prêtres, et souillé ses temples; lorsqu’on a égorgé, brûlé, noyé des milliers de Grecs; lorsqu’on a livré leurs femmes à la prostitution, embrassé et vendu leurs enfans [sic] dans la marche de l’Asie, ce qui restoit [sic] de sang dans le coeur de tant d’infortunés s’est soulevé. Ses esclaves par force, on commença à les défendre avec leurs fers. Le Grec qui déjà n’était [sic] pas sujet par le
droit politique, est devenu libre par le droit de nature.  

Finally, after Chateaubriand sufficiently appeased his more rational listeners, he returned to his Romantic style and admitted that he had been talking passionately about a topic that was very dear to his heart: "On a parlé sans passion, préjugé, sans illusion, avec calme, réserve et mesure, d’un sujet dont on est profondément touché." He then abandoned all rational pretence and filled the last seven pages of his short pamphlet with an excerpt from his travelogue, Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem, in which he, again, described a bleak picture of life in contemporary Greece. His balanced plea was instrumental in finding popular and political support for the Greek cause, which would ultimately convince France to deviate from the Congress System and support the rebels. This ‘rule breaking’ was central to Romantic philosophy, which sought to act purely on one’s emotions with no regard for established protocol.

Unlike France, Russia had a clear political interest in circumventing the boundaries set by the Congress System. They had seen themselves as protectors of the Christian peoples of the Balkans and had for years hoped to dissolve the Ottoman Empire, gaining much coveted access to the Mediterranean in the process. French and British policy had previously been to support the Turks in order to keep Russia away from the Dardanelles. Largely due to public interest in the Greek cause, both France and Britain changed position by 1827, and the two nations began to prefer an independent Greece to a Russia-dominated Balkan Peninsula. The three nations backed Greece militarily at the decisive battle of Navarino. Russia, however, would have entered the war with or without the Russian Romantics. In ‘backward’ tsarist Russia it was unlikely that an artist might influence policy like one would in parliamentary Britain or post-revolutionary, polarized France. Still, there were Romantics in Russia who supported the Greeks. Alexander Pushkin, on hearing of the revolt in 1821, praised Ypsilanti and hoped that Russia would support the rebels. He was one of many Russians to join Filiki Etaria, a secret philhellenic society that raised money for the Greeks. Lord Byron, another founding father of the Romantic movement, also played a key role in the Greek War. Byron was a member of the London Greek Committee — a non-governmental body that had raised £800,000 for the Greek cause — which sent him to Greece in 1823. Byron was never given clear instructions on what to do in Greece but he sent back reports and lent his name to the Romantic image of the war. By the end of 1823, despite his lack of military experience, Byron was making preparations to take the fortress of Lepanto, giving £4,000 of his own money to pay the fleet; but in the end he never saw battle. In April of 1824 Byron died, of a feverish sickness made worse by bloodletting. It was far from a romantic death, but Byron’s demise added greatly to the mythic image of the war. This image was painstakingly crafted by Romantic painters, whose depictions served to increase popular support for the war in Western Europe. Joseph Denis Odevaere was one of the many to portray Byron’s death. In his 1826 painting, Byron was unmistakably a martyr for liberty. He is presented wearing a laurel on his head and holding a lyre in his hand. A statue of Liberty stands above the head of his bed and a sheathed dagger hangs from the headboard. This blatantly symbolic painting, and others like it, made Byron into a symbolic hero of the Greek War.

The use of Classical Greek motifs was common in artists’ renditions of the Greek War. Unlike the depicter of the French Revolution who sought to sever ties to the ancien régime and start anew, the Janus-faced supporters of the Greek Revolt recalled the imagery of antiquity as they longed for a Greece reborn. In paintings, they sought to portray the modern Greeks as the heirs of Greece’s lofty tradition. In reality, the modern Greeks were a far cry from their Classical counterparts. There were about five million ethnic Greeks spread throughout eastern Europe, with around two million in the area that would become the Kingdom of Greece. They were a part of many distinct groups which fought amongst themselves. They did not refer to themselves as “Greeks” but as “Romaioi”, a reference to the Byzantine, or Eastern Roman Empire. Their commonality lay in their religion, which was Eastern Orthodox and was centred on the Patriarch at Constantinople. To the chagrin of their Western European patrons, they showed nothing of the serene culture of Classical Greece. Byron, for one, was shocked by their barbarity, which was often on par, or worse, than that of the Turks. Atrocities were carried out by both sides. Some justified the Greeks’ barbarity by blaming it on their long time existence as slaves; one contemporary Romantic historian said that it was unfair to expect to find “le poli de la civilisation sous les chaines de l’esclavage.” Atrocities carried out by the Greeks were ignored while those of the Turks were painted ad nauseam. The romantics skewed the message for maximum support. The first atrocity to attract the attention of western Europe was the Turkish massacre of 20,000 Greeks in the campagne de 1825 (Paris: Ponthieu, 1826) in Glencross. “Greece Restored,” 42.

of nearly the entire Greek population of the island of Chios, numbering at a minimum of ten thousand people. This tragedy was the emotional symbol the Romantics needed to get Europe's support. In 1824, Eugène Delacroix painted Scènes des massacre de Scio. He did not attempt to show glory in war but to evoke sympathy for a people in desperation. Critics condemned the painting for its lack of a central figure: a child sucks at the breast of a dead woman in one corner, a nearby Turkish officer abducts a nude maiden as a Greek man pleads helplessly for her, two children lie in a dying embrace. One critic dismissed it as “a confused assemblage of figures, or rather half-figures.” A true Romantic, Delacroix abandoned the rules of composition to create an uncomfortable, haunting effect. The painting was exhibited at the 1824 Salon and inspired heated debates both on the subjects of the Greek War and of the Bourbon government that had yet to do anything to help the hallowed rebels. Two Salon attendees, for example, said: “A barbaric war, dishonourable for humanity...is now taking place in the heart of Europe, at the doorstep of the most civilized countries, and all that these countries have found to do is to stay neutral.” Cries like this would help convince the French government to become involved.

A final Romantic technique employed to promote the Greek cause was aesthetics. To shape the myth surrounding the war, painters used the aesthetic contrast between beauty and ugliness and between civilization and barbarity to move their audience. Delacroix painted La Grèce sur les ruines de Missolonghi in 1826 and displayed it at the Salon of 1827. Greece is personified as a beautiful, fair-skinned, bare-breasted woman who stands on the shore among the dead. She looks straight at the audience, arms outstretched as if pleading for help. Over her shoulder in the distance, a black-skinned Oriental looks on. It is a depiction of two opposite peoples; the contrast is altogether racial, cultural, and religious. The religious imagery in this and many other works is intentional. Indeed, conservatives in France and Russia also viewed the war as a religious struggle akin to the Crusades. The Turks reinforced this idea when they executed Gregory V, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, after Mass on Easter Sunday 1821. Conveniently overlooking the fact that shortly before his death he had excommunicated the rebels for their insurrection, the Romantics set Gregory up as a martyr for Greek Independence. The Romantics were masters of building symbolism around events to inspire the desired emotional response in their audience. The Greek War of Independence was, in many ways, compatible with Romantic ideology. The Ancient Greek legacy contributed to sentiments of emotional and spiritual connection to the contemporary Greek cause. Participants from Britain, France and Russia, in true romantic fashion, had to ignore the boundaries established by the Congress of Vienna in order to back the rebels. Through their art, Romantics spread the message to the public, stirring up sympathy with their highly symbolic interpretation. They emphasized specific elements of the conflict, ignoring others that did not fit their message, and depicted a war in the name of Liberty. Ultimately, three of the great powers — France, Britain, and Russia — committed militarily to the cause and won a decisive naval battle at Navarino. Had it not been for the philosophy and the art of the growing romantic movement, the Greeks would never have found the support they needed to gain their independence.

A peace treaty was signed in 1829 and a Bavarian prince was crowned Otto I, King of Greece, in 1833. Romantics from across Europe, perhaps more than the Greeks themselves, could at last sing with Percy Shelley:

The world’s great age begins anew,
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn.

A loftier Argo cleaves the main,
Fraught with a later prize;

14 Howarth. Greek Adventure, 63.
16 Ferdinand Flocon and Marie Aycard. Salon de 1824 in Athanassoglou-Kallymer. French Images, 35
17 Phil Sherrard. “Church, State and the Greek War of Independence” in Richard Clogg ed. The Struggle for Greek Independence, 182-183.
Another Orpheus sings again,  
And loves, and weeps, and dies.  
...  
Another Athens shall arise,  
And to remoter time  
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,  
The splendour of its prime.18

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18 Percy Bysshe Shelley, Hellas, (Pisa: 1821), 1060-1087.